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CAESAR OR A SUBSTITUTE?[†]

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In recent years the perennial dissatisfaction with Caesar as the second-year Latin text seems to be finding expression more often and more strongly than usual. There is scarcely a classical association meeting or a paper on second-year Latin work without its attack on Caesar. We have heard such extreme statements as that all thoughtful teachers are seeking to get away from Caesar; that the most pressing task of classical teachers is to find a substitute for Caesar; and even that the future of classical studies in America depends on the success of classical teachers in this search. On the other hand, it is obvious that there are thousands of teachers who prefer Caesar to any substitute. Else why the outcry against him? But as there is no novelty in a defense of Caesar, and as they desire no change in the existing conditions, they seldom reply to the attacks. There seems danger that those who have given the matter little thought may be misled by the words of one side and the silence of the other into believing that no reasons can be given for the retention of Caesar except the stupidity and inertia of teachers.

It would be folly to maintain that Caesar is ideal for second-year work. What can be maintained is that the ideal does not exist, that Caesar fulfils adequately all legitimate requirements for second-year work, and that no substitute exists with which the proper work of that year can be done so well. We are considering,

[†] Although this article maintains an opposite position, it is by no means to be considered as written in reply to Professor Leiper's thoughtful and temperate article, with much of which I agree. By a curious coincidence my paper was put in its final form for publication only a few hours before his was submitted to me for approval. The two are presented together, as the two sides of the shield. As Professor Leiper has had no opportunity to see my paper I have not yielded to the temptation to modify some parts of my paper for the purpose of meeting his points, but am printing it word for word as it was written before I saw his paper.

of course, the work of pupils of high-school age. We are all familiar with the argument that teachers in English and German schools use a great variety of reading in second-year work. Those who use this argument do not always remind us that the pupils in those schools begin Latin much earlier than in our schools and give it much more time. Again, we are considering the main work of the second year, not the easier reading which may be needed at the end of the first year or the beginning of the second, as a preparation for the main work.

The argument from past experience is one which should appeal to Latin teachers with peculiar force. We must remember that the present wave of dissatisfaction with Caesar had its counterpart some fifteen or twenty years ago. That wave found expression in the report of the Committee of Ten, just as the present one has in the recent report of the Committee of Fifteen on Latin Entrance Requirements. It is true that neither report specifically recommends Nepos as superior to Caesar; but both reports give evidence of a feeling that Caesar is unsatisfactory, and suggest Nepos as at least a partial substitute. The report of the Committee of Ten was soon followed by the appearance of several editions of Nepos, and of four second-year Latin books which aimed to substitute variety for the monotony of Caesar. No one who wanted to get away from Caesar could complain of inability to find textbooks intended for this very purpose. If he did not find the material suitable for his purpose, it was only because the editors could not find it in the whole field of Latin literature. Alas for the high hopes of editors and publishers! Exact figures as to the use of these books cannot be obtained, but it is well known that they once had a considerable sale, which has now greatly fallen off. Caesar still reigns supreme in the second year.

If one asks a believer in these books for an explanation of their failure to supplant Caesar, he may get two. The first is that colleges and universities refused to accept substitutes for Caesar. Surely this cannot be true of a majority of these institutions, though it may well be that the majority of college men refused to recommend them. Perhaps the colleges had fallen into the habit of stating their requirement as four books of Caesar, because that

was the amount the schools usually found themselves best able to do; and they may not always have printed the fact that they were willing to accept substitutes, because substitutes were seldom offered; but that any considerable number did actually refuse to accept them may well be doubted. Certainly some recommended them. At any rate, this explanation fails to account for the fact that the use of the substitutes was considerable for a time, then fell off.

The second explanation is the conservatism, prejudice, inertia, or ignorance of teachers. Undeniably some teachers have all these qualities; but there are enough wide-awake, thoughtful, well-trained teachers to make the fortune of any publisher who could give them an improvement on Caesar. And what has become of the intelligent and progressive teachers who once did use the substitutes? Have most of them died or married? Are their successors less intelligent?

The true explanation seems to be that given by Professor Bennett in Bennett and Bristol's *Teaching of Latin and Greek*. It is in substance that Nepos is found by actual experience not to do the work as well as Caesar, being neither easier nor more interesting, and lacking some of the good qualities of Caesar. As Professor Bennett is himself a confessed convert from the Nepos cult, his testimony is the more convincing. Probably his change of heart typifies the usual experience of those who decry Caesar. The arguments against Caesar are plausible, the teacher does not like to think himself old fashioned, and he makes a change. But he finds that for some reason his class does not do as well: it does not gain in power satisfactorily as the year progresses; it does not manifest that keen interest in biography, for example, that the advocates of Nepos postulate. The teacher cannot quite explain it, but he is glad to get back to Caesar.

So the experience of the past seems to show that nothing but a temporary confusion can result from attempts to dethrone Caesar. Yet this argument can carry no weight if there are decisive arguments against him, or if changed conditions in secondary schools necessitate new aims and ideals in teaching Latin.

The arguments used against Caesar resolve themselves into four: first, he is too hard for the first connected reading; second,

he is not interesting; third, he is monotonous; fourth, his subject-matter is not vitally significant for the modern pupil or for modern civilization.

No universally valid statement can be made about the difficulty of Caesar. Whether or not he is too hard depends on the class and on the teacher and on the choice of beginner's book. Millions of school children have been able to read him immediately after the beginner's book. An unfortunate host of others has not been able. If a teacher knows that Caesar is too hard for a class, there are several little books of easier Latin that may serve as bridges to him. To recommend the use of one of them only so long as is necessary to prepare for the real work of the year is a very different thing from recommending a substitute for Caesar. And it is not necessary to read the first four books without omissions. Parts of the last three books are both easier and more interesting than parts of the first four. In particular, something should be substituted for the Ariovistus campaign, with its overload of indirect discourse. Teachers do not always realize how little further use even the college student has for the training in indirect discourse so laboriously given him before he is ready for it. But this is an argument against teaching Caesar with misdirected zeal, not against teaching Caesar.

The statement that Caesar is not interesting, like any other question of taste, defies argument. Yet, with due regard for exceptional cases, it may fairly be said that liking or disliking Caesar is chiefly a matter of knowledge—that the teacher who really knows what Caesar did, and who has his class follow the story understandingly, is not likely to complain on the score of interest. Certainly many teachers find him interesting, and, what is more to the point, find their pupils interested in him.

The charge of monotony means sometimes one thing, sometimes another. Sometimes it means that the teacher gets tired of teaching the same thing year after year. But every new class finds Caesar new and fresh: the course of study is not a device for amusing or instructing the teacher. And if the teacher will take Caesar seriously he may be sure of finding something new to learn about his campaigns for the rest of his life. Mr. Holmes, who spent

eleven years in writing Caesar's *Conquest of Gaul*, has learned enough in the past twelve years to necessitate a rewriting of the book; and even now, though his work is far the best that has ever been done on Caesar, there are many points on which the last word has not yet been said. At other times the charge of monotony means that the pupil gets tired of reading one author for a whole year. Perhaps that is true: much depends on how interesting he finds the author. The other side is that the pupil who reads Caesar straight through a year finds him becoming easier and easier, and gets an ever-increasing sense of power which is worth more than the supposed interest aroused by variety. Consider the matter of vocabulary, for example. A pupil who omits the Ariovistus campaign will encounter an average of thirty-one new words in each chapter of Book i, eleven in Book ii, nine in Book iii, and six in Book iv, omitting fractions in each case. Probably a count of new syntactical constructions would be still more convincing. Does anyone suppose that such a showing could be made for any combination of authors? Professor Bennett is of the opinion that Nepos does not get perceptibly easier as the pupil advances; no doubt he is right in thinking that this is one of the chief reasons for the hold which Caesar has on the schools. It is no unworthy reason, for it is worth while from every point of view to give the pupil an increasing sense of power of accomplishment.

The charge that Caesar's subject-matter is not vitally significant appears at first sight the most serious and convincing. Yet to stress this charge involves maintaining two untenable assumptions: first, that there are other parts of Latin literature which are more vitally significant and at the same time equally suitable for second-year work; second, that second-year Latin is taught primarily for its subject-matter. The first assumption we may dismiss as false, at least until some definite suggestion is made of a more suitable and more significant author than Nepos. The second is equally false. No teacher of Latin really believes that second-year Latin is taught primarily for its subject-matter. To maintain such a thesis would be in effect to agree with those who would have us cease to teach Latin and substitute a study of the literature through translations. The pupil reads only some ninety pages of Latin in

his second year, and has already spent another year in preparing to read that amount. Where in all the literature of the world are there ninety pages whose contents are worth digging out from a foreign tongue by two years of hard work, when they are available in translation? In fact, the knowledge of the subject-matter, whatever the author read, is among the least important of the things which the pupil will carry away from his second year of Latin. That this is neither a denial that the subject-matter must be worthy, nor a failure to recognize the great importance of studying the subject-matter, nor an admission that the subject-matter of Caesar is unworthy, will be evident from what follows. That in later years of the study the value of the subject-matter becomes increasingly important, goes without saying.

Now that the objections to Caesar have been discussed, there remains for consideration the question whether he has the positive qualifications to be the medium through which the chief purposes of Latin study may be achieved. This necessitates stating, as briefly as may be, the aims of the study, and estimating their relative importance in second-year work. Four chief aims may be recognized: first, the ability to read Latin; second, mental discipline; third, the improvement of the pupil's English; fourth, the benefit to be derived from a study of the contents, on the literary, historical, ethical, and aesthetic sides.

Of these, the ability to read Latin stands on an entirely different plane from the other three. It was once the chief aim and value of Latin study, but that was long ago. Since then, though discussions of Latin teaching sometimes seem to be based on the hypothesis that it is still both the chief aim and the chief value, it is merely the convenient practical aim of the teacher, not the chief value at all, hardly even a real value. The other three are the real values for whose sake Latin is in the curriculum. Yet as the practical aim it is to be given due consideration in selecting the material for second-year reading.

Of the three real values, it makes little difference whether mental discipline or the improvement of the pupil's English be thought of first importance, for good teaching will bring about both alike. The relative importance of the content value depends on what one

includes under this head. It has already been said that a knowledge of the contents is one of the least important things which the pupil will carry away from his second year of Latin. But a sharp discrimination must be made between the value of the facts and ideas expressed by the Latin and the value of the process of extracting the facts and ideas from the Latin. In a sense this latter phase belongs to mental discipline; but here something more is meant than the process of observing facts in the Latin sentence and drawing correct inferences from them as to the meaning of the sentence. The habit of weighing carefully the meaning of each sentence by itself and in relation to its context, for the sake of getting at the meaning of the whole passage, may be one of the most important things which the pupil will carry away from his study of Latin, whether he becomes a lawyer or an engineer or a physician or follows any other calling which requires the extraction of the exact meaning from a printed page. The value of this habit, not the value of the contents themselves, is the justification for insisting that the pupil must follow with intelligent comprehension the thought of his author.

Of course there is nothing novel in the foregoing statement of the values of Latin study. All recognize them, whatever differences of opinion there may be as to their relative importance. The point is that these values are the only important and universally valid ones for second-year Latin. There are some minor values, to be sure, as, for example, the service of Latin to the student of French; but no other important value has been discovered or developed by the changing conditions in the secondary schools. They are the great ends for which Latin has been and will be retained in the curriculum. The fitness of Caesar and of the substitutes for Caesar must be determined with reference to these great ends.

Which of these aims cannot be attained adequately, even admirably, by the use of Caesar? Certainly no one can doubt that he furnishes admirable material with which to teach the reading of Latin. His vocabulary is not large, and, except for the proper names, it consists almost entirely of words which are needed for future reading; for although he wrote of military matters his technical military words and phrases are surprisingly few. His

syntax is simple, except for the indirect discourse, and almost perfectly normal, so that the pupil who is to go no farther has the minimum of syntax to learn, while the one who is to go farther gets the best possible foundation for future work. His style is free from affectations, complexities, or subtle allusions, which might perplex the pupil even when he understands the Latin. It has already been remarked that as a result of these qualities the pupil makes a relatively rapid gain in the ability to read him. Surely for this purpose no other author equals Caesar.

Probably no one doubts that Caesar furnishes a good discipline, for criticism is apt to take the ground that this is his chief function.

The benefit to the pupil's English comes partly through learning the words which are the basis of so much of our own language, partly through a study of word formation, partly through a comparison of our grammatical system with that of the Latin, but most of all through careful translation, which involves both a weighing of synonyms and a recasting of the Latin form of expression into our own very different idiom. Of these only the vocabulary and the translation seem to be affected at all by the choice of reading-material. Professor Bennett has pointed out that Caesar's vocabulary is much more concrete than that of Nepos, who is more apt to use words in transferred, figurative, abstract senses. Evidently there is an advantage in learning a word first in its concrete meaning, the source from which its figurative meanings spring. Moreover, this concreteness of vocabulary lightens the task of selecting among synonyms, and thus makes Caesar more appropriate for the early stages of the pupil's progress in good translation. The plain, straightforward style, too, makes it comparatively easy to find an adequate translation for his sentences. It is to be hoped that no teacher has so low an ideal of good translation, or so little perception of the qualities of Caesar's style, as to think an adequate translation of Caesar too easy a task. It is merely not too discouragingly hopeless.

It is obvious that if the contents of the Latin are to be studied they must be worth study. If they are trivial, childish, or too familiar, there will be no effort in this direction. Caesar's story is a serious narrative of important events, written by one of the

greatest men in history. It is emphatically worth study—more study than it commonly gets. It has also the advantage of being true history. It must be a trifle embarrassing to one who is teaching the first Life of Nepos to have to admit that the author knew his facts so slightly that he confused two Miltiades. And the narrative is clearly told, easy to follow with such helps as are given in any edition. For this purpose, too, it is hard to see how any author can be better than Caesar.

But those who discuss second-year Latin, while admitting that these are the aims and ideals of the study, sometimes speak as if new conditions in the schools had brought with them a need for new means and methods. In fact there are new conditions. Pupils are drawn on the one hand into easy and attractive “cultural” courses which make no real demand on their energies or mental powers; on the other, into severely practical vocational courses; and we sometimes imagine that Latin is losing ground in the competition. We are advised, in effect, that we must meet this competition by making the Latin course easy and attractive. So far as it can be made easier and more attractive without sacrificing the great aims for which Latin is studied, well and good; but some of the attempts to give ease and attractiveness come perilously near seeming to be founded on the theory that the great aim of Latin teaching is to enable teachers to hold on to their jobs. But it is hopeless to try to compete with some of these subjects on their own grounds. Latin cannot be made as evidently practical as domestic science, nor as easy to read as a modern language, nor as wishy-washy as some other things. If pupils are going to elect subjects for their ease and surface attractiveness, the Latin teacher is beaten at the start, even though he substitute a simplified comedy for history or oratory or epic and buy a pony with which to get his own lesson, as one publishing house invites him to do. Latin must compete with the easier subjects by being something they cannot be—solid mental pabulum, neither made needlessly repellent nor garnished up to resemble something else. That Latin can compete by being itself is shown by the reports of the Commissioner of Education. If it tries to be something else it will lose and will deserve to lose.